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Far from Home and Far from Normal: The Experience of an International Student on an American College Campus at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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Listed under the "Seniors" section of Purdue University's 1904 *Debris*, there is a Japanese study-abroad student by the name of Sukichi Yoshisaka.[1] He is the only Asian senior to be found in the *Debris* that year. On a campus that was thoroughly dominated by white students at the time, during a period in American history when the rising population of immigrants was making people across the nation question just what it meant to be "American," one might wonder how a student like Sukichi was treated by his peers. By studying cases such as that of Sukichi, we can determine how the student body perceived the presence of

international students and the type of experience such a student had in an American college setting at the turn of the twentieth century.

During the school year of 1903–1904, there was a significant interest at Purdue in foreign cultures. One particularly striking instance of that interest is in the number of fictional stories that featured some aspects from other cultures and nations and portrayed them in peculiar ways, which were published in the 1903–1904 editions of the University's newspaper, the *Exponent*. For example, a featured story from the September 16, 1903 edition of the paper, titled "The Egyptian Vases," told a fictional account of an Egyptian student on Purdue's campus and discussed spiritual phenomena involving an ornate vase and the pursuit of crown jewels.[2] Another example includes a story in the September 23, 1903 edition, called "Mister Kinnigan Tells of His 'Soonday Axkurshun'," which poked fun at the Scottish accent.[3] While the purpose of these two stories seemed to be to exploit the "strangeness" of other cultures for the reader's entertainment, not all such stories were necessarily meant to make fun of any particular society. This presence of foreign cultures in *Exponent* stories shows that, regardless of whether the views on foreign cultures were positive or negative, the majority of students had an overall fascination with them at

the time. Furthermore, another example from the September 23 edition of the *Exponent* is a section entitled "A Letter from Professor Robertson," which discussed how some white missionaries wished to become more involved with the Chinese.[4] This particular account was chronicled in the *Exponent* editions throughout the rest of the school year, and it showcased an intent to convert those from other cultures to become what Americans at the time considered more "enlightened."

Some of the apparent interest in other cultures on campus during the 1903–1904 year also can be seen in how members of the senior class interacted with the international students. Besides Sukichi Yoshisaka, there were other study-abroad seniors listed in the 1904 *Debris* who serve as examples of how foreign students were treated during this time on Purdue's campus. While there were many students who identified as "foreign," due to having been born outside of the United States, I intend to focus on the students who were studying abroad rather than those who had immigrated. Two such students, Milan Karchoff from Bulgaria and Alex Lindsay from Great Britain, were often associated with Sukichi within the text of the *Debris*. Milan's biographical description claims that he desires an American wife and insists that he has a "princely bearing."[5] Alex's description states that, "His noble and

polished brow shining for the want of nature's covering soon turned all fear of military harm into wonder at the intellectual foreigner,"[6] in which the editors of the *Debris* imply that Alex had an intelligent and no-nonsense or perhaps even imposing air about him, which his peers associated with his heritage. Sukichi, Alex, and Milan were all listed together under Alex's description with the label of "the beloved foreigners."[7] While these statements could be seen as lighthearted and joking in nature, and many other students were subjected to mockery of their character in the *Debris*, the writers seem to have been specifically mocking the fact that these three were not from the United States. Historian Whitney Walton argues in *Internationalism, National Identities, and Study Abroad: France and the United States, 1890–1970* that the word "foreign" holds a connotation of being inherently different or strange in some manner.[8] The editors of the *Debris* grouped the international students together despite the three being of very different backgrounds and temperaments, and one can construe that the student body was, in a way, isolating the international students and labeling them as "the others."

Also worth mentioning is that in Sukichi's depiction, the Japanese student is described as "now formulating a wireless method of transmission by which

he hopes to electrocute the entire Russian forces. He is at present experimenting on Karchoff [the Bulgarian study-abroad senior] as the nearest substitute for a Russian."[9] Although the statement is obviously meant in jest, this description was written around the same time that the Russo-Japanese War was taking place, suggesting that either there is some truth to the statement and Sukichi may have actually disliked Russians, or that the writers of the *Debris* were drawing upon the world events of their time to form parallels with their own fellow students and make a generalized and stereotypical statement for the sole purpose of humor.[10]

Although the *Debris* categorizes him as "foreign," it would seem that Sukichi, as a student and member of the college community, was at least moderately active on campus and was well known by his peers. For example, he took a role in the Mechanics Burning, a traditional ceremony amongst Purdue students at the time.[11] Sukichi gave a reading at the ceremony, and the fact that he participated in an event in which there were few major presentations shows that he was accepted as a socially involved student. However, on the page in the 1904 *Debris* describing the Mechanics Burning, it was remarked that "Yoshisaka read a mixture of Japanese and pidgin English which no one understood," showing that the student body had no qualms about

misrepresenting and insulting cultural differences that they viewed as oddities.[12]

Another example of how Sukichi was perceived by his peers occurs, again, in the 1904 *Debris*, in a poem titled "What Would You Think." The work consists of naming various students at Purdue and reciting for each person an activity that presumably would be considered by their peers to be absurdly incompatible with their own personalities and characters if they were to perform such actions. Sukichi is mentioned in this poem with the line "[What would you think if you should see] Sukichi called Smith."[13] The mere fact that he is mentioned in this poem suggests that Sukichi had enough of a noticeable presence on campus and among his fellow seniors to be given recognition as someone who was at least slightly popular, influential, or if nothing else, interesting. However, one also could claim that there is an underlying sense of mocking and even possibly racist sentiment toward Sukichi due to his heritage, as the poem seems to imply that a Japanese student possessing a common, predominantly Caucasian surname would be absurd and ridiculous. Such instances in which Sukichi's peers mocked his culture can be seen as further evidence that perhaps Sukichi, no matter how well liked he may have been by his peers, was never fully accepted by the other students.

Overall, for Sukichi in particular, it seems that his status as a Japanese student studying abroad made him the subject of some jokes and taunting. In comparison to the jabs faced by other students, it is not obvious whether or not Sukichi was teased or bullied in significantly harsher ways or more frequently than his peers, and in fact, such jabs at him may have been a sign that his peers were comfortable enough with him to feel a sense of camaraderie. However, it should be noted that Sukichi was primarily picked on simply because of his "foreign" status, unlike his peers, who got picked on for their habits or quirks. The fact that he was from Japan, that he was not quite like the rest of them, was seen by the other students as Sukichi's most noticeable feature, and whether or not their opinion of it was favorable or unsavory, it was the one aspect of Sukichi on which they primarily focused.

Even in 1904, the idea of studying abroad was established, having been popularized sometime around the late nineteenth century. For example, Walton remarks in her book that there were about 8,375 students from foreign nations who were studying abroad in American colleges in 1922.[14] Furthermore, in "Pilgrims to Western Seats of Learning—China's First Educational Mission to the United States," Arthur G. Robinson states that in 1872, just a few decades before

Sukichi came to Purdue, a group of Chinese students was sent to study abroad in Hartford, Massachusetts. The group consisted of 120 boys who were between the ages of nine to thirteen, and they were the participants of history's first organized educational exchange of Chinese students to America.[15] While the situation of these boys is in a lot of ways different to Sukichi's, due to differences in their respective time periods, ages, levels of education, countries of origin, and locations of the institutions attended, I believe some parallels can be drawn between the two scenarios due to the fact that both subjects were Asians who were studying in America at a time when racism and anti-Asian sentiment were significantly more widely and freely expressed than in the present day.

In the case of the boys from the 1872 project, Robinson mentions that the Chinese students were allowed some freedom by their foster families to maintain their Asian lifestyles. The study claims that the boys were not forced to go to church or change their style of dress, and while some did do so, it was of their own volition.[16] In addition, a group of educators, of which President Noah Porter of Yale University and author Mark Twain were members, praised the project for allowing the foreign students to stay true to their cultural heritage while also exploring new horizons, showing

that there was a favorable and optimistic opinion about the future of the boys and the program amongst some intellectuals.[17] However, American society overall, and many academic institutions in particular, were not as easily accepting of the Asian students, as there was a widely spread attitude of racial stigma, especially on the Pacific Coast. When some of the Chinese boys attempted to apply for admittance to universities in Washington, they were soundly refused, with the reason for the rejection being "There is no room provided for Chinese students." This instance of rejection by the American universities was one of the biggest blows to the Chinese government's perception of the credibility and usefulness of the project, and in 1881, the students were recalled to China.[18] Once they returned, they faced disrespect from the Chinese populace and government simply because they had taken part in the project. Yet despite the circumstances, many of the boys grew to claim influential and well-respected positions in society as a result of their education abroad. These occupations included those of doctors, translators, government officials, and engineers.[19]

While Sukichi was from Japan rather than China and did not face the same sort of political backlash from his own home country, perhaps his situation did parallel that of the Chinese boys; perhaps he was

given some grief by both American and Japanese society. As previously evidenced, there is reason to believe that Sukichi, while not necessarily bullied or greatly disrespected, was likely treated differently than his white American peers and stereotyped to a degree. Due to his Asian heritage, his fellow students were likely unable to fully accept him as being just like the rest of them, and similarly, his peers in Japan might not have been fully able to accept Sukichi due to his global experiences. His archival trail runs cold from this point forward, as I have not been able to locate American records of him beyond 1904. It is possible that Sukichi moved back to his hometown of Kobe, Japan, soon after graduating, and we may ponder whether, once back in his home country, he was yet again seen as somehow being different from the people around him, simply because he had studied in America. Studying abroad remained a controversial topic throughout Sukichi's time at Purdue and beyond. According to Chiang Yung-Chen in her article "Chinese Students in America in the Early Twentieth Century," Chinese dissenters of study-abroad programs in 1920 often stated that Western education and customs had no place in Eastern society and used such an argument to support their position.[20] Similarly, perhaps Sukichi was, in Japan,

seen as somehow "foreign" for having learned English and possibly picked up American habits. Perhaps his newly acquired skills from college were dismissed on the basis that they had no place in Japanese society. Or perhaps, on the other hand, similar to the Chinese boys from 1872, his experience studying overseas actually made him a more ideal candidate for high-paying and well-respected jobs, and a degree in engineering from an American institution like Purdue might have made Sukichi seem like a more favorable candidate in the eyes of a Japanese employer.

Nowadays, Purdue sports a large population of international students on campus, and as of the fall 2013 semester, it ranks second amongst all public universities in terms of the number of international students enrolled.[21] Yet in 1904, Sukichi Yoshisaka was one of the very few on campus. In a time when international student programs were still coming into their own and racist attitudes ran more rampant, Sukichi can serve as an example of how study-abroad students lived in America at the turn of the twentieth century. Perhaps, by studying similar cases of international students throughout American history, we can even offer insight as to how views on international students have changed and evolved up until today.

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Notes

1. *Debris*, 1904, the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries, 119.

2. "The Egyptian Vases," *Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Sept. 16, 1903, 3–4.

3. "Mister Kinnigan Tells of His 'Soonday Axkurshun'," *Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Sept. 23, 1903, 3–4.

4. "A Letter from Professor Robertson," *Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Sept. 23, 1903, 6.

5. *Debris*, 1904, 89.

6. Ibid., 93.

7. Ibid.

8. Whitney Walton, *Internationalism, National Identities, and Study Abroad: France and the United States, 1890–1970* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 2.

9. *Debris*, 1904, 119.

10. The Russo-Japanese War took place from February 1904 to September 1905. The cause was that both the Japanese and Russian empires wanted control of Manchuria.

11. The Mechanics Burning was an end-of-year ceremony at Purdue in which students burned their mechanics textbooks in a mock funeral.

12. *Debris*, 1904, 276.

13. Ibid., 300.

14. Walton, 1.

15. Arthur G. Robinson, "Pilgrims to Western Seats of Learning—China's First Educational Mission to the United States," *Chinese Studies in History* 36, no. 4 (Summer 2003): 63.

16. Ibid., 79.

17. Ibid., 83.

18. Ibid., 82.

19. Ibid., 86.

20. Yung-Chen Chiang, "Chinese Students in America in the Early Twentieth Century," *Chinese Studies in History* 36, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 40.

21. "International Students and Scholars—Purdue University," *Purdue University,* accessed November 12, 2013, http://www.iss.purdue.edu.